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SUBJECT: MALIAN SOLDIERS KILL TUAREG GENDARME IN GAO

¶1. On October 17 Assaleh ag Mohamed, an ethnic Tuareg and former rebel who was integrated into the Malian gendarmarie in 1996, was killed by members of the Malian regular army in Gao. Unofficial sources in Gao report that the killing occurred in a garage area within the confines of a Malian military camp. The soldiers suspected of killing ag Mohamed are southern Malians who belong to a regiment based in Kati. They had recently been ordered to the northern front of Tinzawaten where the Tuareg rebel Ibrahim Bahanga is holding several dozen Malian soldiers hostage.

¶2. Ag Mohamed, who was posted to the town of San in central Mali, was returning to duty after several days of leave in his home village of Tinaouker about 70 KM north of Gao. Several versions of the circumstances surrounding ag Mohamed's death have surfaced. Official reports, conveyed by the government newspaper L'Essor, indicate that ag Mohamed's death was accidental and resulted from miscommunication at a military checkpoint after ag Mohamed allegedly failed to properly identify himself. In a second version advanced by Tuaregs based in Gao, soldiers became suspicious of ag Mohamed after he was spotted using a satellite telephone while parked in front of the military base. According to this version, which has not been confirmed by Malian officials, ag Mohamed was brought into custody within the base and subsequently bound, beaten and shot. These sources also allege that ag Mohamed was carrying the equivalent of 18,000 dollars in cash collected from his family to purchase a car.

¶3. The Malian military is currently investigating the murder. Perhaps as many as ten soldiers are being held in connection with the case. Several postings to Tuareg websites have described ag Mohamed's murder as a racially charged lynching. While ag Mohamed's killing is not linked to the ongoing hostage crisis involving Ibrahim Bahanga in northern Mali, the murder by southern Malian soldiers of an ex-Tuareg rebel who had successfully integrated into the Malian armed forces does not help matters. To defuse some of the tension, Minister of Security Sadio Gassama traveled to Gao to personally attend ag Mohamed's funeral. Ag Mohamed was also awarded a posthumous promotion.

McCulley